

Queer in the ARA

Photo by M. Best

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* All the names in this article have been changed. Many ARA members and/or supporters use pseudonyms to protect them from potential Heritage Front harassment and violence. Others have asked that their real names not be used in order to protect them from both Heritage Front and ARA retaliation.

by ERIN GILL

Since June 11, when demonstrators at an Anti-Racist Action (ARA) protest vandalized the home of an important Heritage Front organizer, newspapers in this city — mainstream and otherwise — have been quick to pass judgement on ARA and to generalize about its membership. One reporter described ARA as a group of "gays and lesbians and members of the far left." No one I have spoken with would agree with that generalization.

I attended the June 11 demo and I was struck by the number of queer people, particularly queer women, who showed up. I started to imagine ARA teeming with young, queer women — the women who were walking next to me as we marched up Bertmount Street to, as it turned out, attack the home of Heritage Front organizer, Gary Schipper.

In its flyers, ARA describes itself as an "open group" committed to a "multi-racial, multi-cultural, sexually diverse, liberated and fun society." It's not a gay/lesbian group, but it does have its gay/lesbian/queer members. It's also a youth oriented organization with many members in their teens. Unlike many other activist groups in the city that make it difficult for anyone younger than twenty to get involved, ARA specifically recruits teenagers.

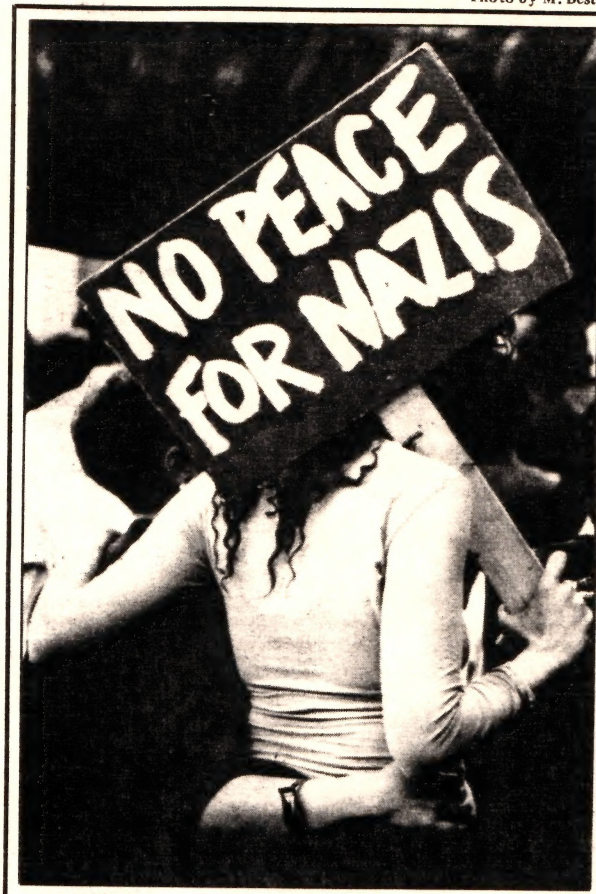
The queer women I spoke with who are, or have been, involved in ARA, all spoke of the same initial attraction to ARA. 'Susan' attended a few ARA general meetings because she liked the idea of a multi-issued group, a group that would fight not just against homophobia but also against anti-Semitism, and racist organizations. And Susan liked the idea that ARA

operated as a direct-action group. As a Jewish lesbian she wanted to do something about the hate she feels around her.

'Adrienne' became involved in ARA in the fall of '92 and she cites ARA's broad and inclusive goals as her reasons for joining. To her, ARA looked like the perfect alternative to many of the other all-talk, no action anti-racist organizations in the city.

'Molly,' a member of ARA's media crew and a lesbian, says that it's not surprising that lesbians, gays, and bisexuals would be drawn to the ARA. She reminds us that non-heterosexuals have always fought for human rights and against fascism because it's in their self-interest. 'Susan' would agree with her — one of ARA's potential strengths, 'Susan' suggests, is that because it's not a specifically lesbian/gay organization it may be safer to its queer members to fight homophobia from within the ARA. She wonders whether she would feel as safe attending an anti-Heritage Front rally if she knew all the protesters would be queer. Fags and dykes are still thought of as a bunch of pansies and ugly women regardless of how short our hair is and how big our boots!

That the ARA is not a queer organization is clear. 'Molly' describes the gay/lesbian/queer membership as 'vocal' while others have asserted that most of ARA's 'queer' members identify as bisexual, largely for political reasons, meaning that most of the sexual relationships in this small and incestuous



'homophobia' and 'heterosexism' are. ARA does have an internal education program set up (thus far, they have dealt with a couple of issues including ableism) yet 'Molly' admits that internal education is often sacrificed in order to keep the direct-action aspect of the organization operating.

'Adrienne' suggests that because so many ARA members identify as

ation of anti-racism involves a lot more than adding one 'politically correct' sentence into a constitution. And, recently, there have been allegations of homophobic behaviour on the part of ARA members. Incidences of homophobic verbal and physical abuse have been denied by ARA and, although the accusations are impossible to prove or disprove, the question still remains as to what an organization like the ARA, drawing its membership from diverse age, race, and political backgrounds, needs to do in order to guarantee that its 'queer-positive' mission statement be understood and endorsed by all its members.

Apart from allegations of homophobia, many of the queer women and men I spoke with had concerns regarding ARA's structure and decision-making process. 'Molly' says that decisions are made at general meetings by consensus. If consensus proves elusive, the

group can vote and a two-thirds majority is required for the motion to pass. 'Adrienne' argues that a very small group of ARA members actually run the organization and that no one else wants to cause trouble (specifically for themselves) by blocking consensus.

Both 'Susan' and 'John,' a gay male who has attended an ARA general meeting, worry about a lack of communication between the organizing members and the larger group that comes out to meetings. 'John' said that he was surprised and scared at the tight structure and absence of open discussion at the general meeting he attended — for those reasons he hasn't returned. 'Adrienne,' having been seriously involved with ARA in the past, thinks the problem may lie in the overwhelming self-righteousness of ARA's main members. Their view, she says, is that there is "nothing wrong with this group. This group is perfect."

With all of these problems, ARA still seems to be one of the only direct-action organizations fighting fascism and white-supremacy that young, queer people can turn to. While ARA's name suggests that the organization fights racism (presumably in its many forms) the group has consciously focussed its attention on organized fascism and white-supremacists. Some people think the emphasis on groups like the Heritage Front and the Church of the Creator has meant that individual racist incidents, institutionalized racism, and internalized racism, tend to be forgotten. By focussing on the far-right, ARA may be inadvertently reinforcing the belief that only self-proclaimed fascists are racist/homophobic, etc. . . . and that the 'rest of us' are just fine. In fact, ARA's posters and placards seem to suggest that if we manage to hunt down and get rid of every self-identifying fascist then everything will be corrected.

What I keep pondering is the fact that this 'multi-cultural' society of ours has, and continues, to produce people who are vulnerable to the arguments put forth by organized fascism. There is not a finite number of racist people who we can just eradicate. Racism keeps 'popping up again' because it is a part, albeit an unfortunate part, of

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SPEAKING OUT!

group are heterosexual. One person I spoke with said that "if you're not sharing an apartment or sleeping with another ARA member, you're no one in the ARA."

ARA is committed to a sexually diverse society but thus far it hasn't put into effect any internal education programs to ensure that all its members are lesbian/gay positive and that they understand what

bisexual there is the assumption within the organization that gay/lesbian issues are understood. Yet most queers come to realize that a queer-positive attitude — on the part of an individual or organization — is inevitably problematized by internalized homophobia. Being queer-positive isn't a matter merely of identifying as such, just like a company's or organization's declar-

violent Heritage Front retaliation, lesbians and gays (particularly residents of the Church/Wellesley area) and people of colour also become targets of fascists retaliation after a demo like June 11th's.

The June 11th demo came shortly after Toronto's Tamil community had suffered two racist attacks leaving one man dead and another paralyzed. The demonstration may have helped to show white-supremacists that these attacks will not be suffered in silence, but it may also have increased the likelihood of Tamils and other visible minorities in Toronto of becoming targets for retaliation.

I don't suggest that ARA stop all activity in order to 'protect' people of colour and queers from danger (obviously we are in danger to begin with!), but communication between ARA and the communities most vulnerable to white-

supremacists might allow these 'at-risk' groups and individuals to be aware, at the very least, that we/they are in danger. I heard a lot of queer people at the June 11 rally worry that angry Heritage Front members would 'cruise' for queers in retaliation, and apparently they did. In particular, rumours of a planned Heritage Front 'activity' on Pride Day worried many. I wondered why someone — the ARA in particular — didn't make an effort to warn all of us oblivious, celebrating queers. WARN US with leaflets, or with press releases to community newspapers and radio stations. Just WARN US!

In the end, whatever one thinks about the structure, organization, and activities of the ARA, a lot of queers have attended ARA demos because they feel that visual opposition to homophobic and racist incidents and organizations should

be a priority. The queer women and men I saw at the June 11th demo were political and angry. We may lead very open and out lives as queers but that doesn't mean we want to limit ourselves exclusively to the lesbian/gay community and its organizations.

And although homophobia is a big concern, a lot of us think that racism and sexism are too. The 'official' lesbian/gay/queer community doesn't offer a direct-action group to fight racist and homophobic violence. In fact, queers of colour and Jewish queers often find enough racism and anti-Semitism within the queer community to make the notion of an anti-racist queer organization seem more than a little ironic.

So . . . we are left with few choices . . . but we'll probably see a lot of politicized, queer individuals at future rallies — ARA or otherwise.

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our 'multicultural' society. We do need to go after the 'Heritage Fronts,' but, in the process, we can't forget the fact that racism and homophobia come in less blatant forms. Most of the homophobic incidents I've experienced haven't come from Heritage Front members, they've come from friends, family, and anonymous assholes on the street.

Of course, every mainly-white, anti-racist organization also has the responsibility to think about internalized racism among its members. ARA is predominantly white and that is not necessarily a horrible thing — white people need to fight racism for the same reasons that men need to fight sexism. ARA organizers also need to remind themselves that, although their members knowingly risk